

Opening Day Address of House Speaker Calvin Say

Honored guests, members, ladies and gentlemen. Aloha and welcome. The 24th Hawaii State Legislature convenes today.

Our nation remains engaged in a war overseas with no end in sight, and our state faces an important turning point in its future.

I want to speak in these next few minutes with as much candor and clarity as possible because I believe the challenge of our times demands it.

The days ahead will be difficult, but we will be guided forward in the certain knowledge that the talents, creativity, generosity, and resilience of the people of Hawaii are almost unlimited. Their patience, however, is not. They expect us to move Hawaii forward without regard to personal politics or special interests.

Allow me to share with you where I see our biggest challenges. They are a call for citizenship to which each of us must respond on a national, state and community level.

The War in Iraq

Let me begin with our nation.

There are those who claim that this legislative body should concern itself only with state matters – that the war in Iraq is something for our leaders in Washington to worry about. I am troubled by that thought. It has been estimated that the final costs of this war will be close to one trillion dollars.

For Hawaii alone, the war will cost more than 1-point-2 billion dollars. Just think – with those resources we could have provided health care for more than 400-thousand of our people. We could have paid the salaries of more than 23-thousand elementary school teachers. Or, we could have built three-thousand-eight-hundred affordable housing units. We could have hired almost 30-thousand public safety officers. Any way we look at it, Hawaii's losses in this war have been substantial.

However, I would like to point out that through it all, our military has stood strong. Their bravery, dedication to Hawaii and the nation, and

their courage in the face of such overwhelming brutality in Iraq is enormous. Our praise and thanks for their sacrifice should be unending.

As of this month, 181 young men and women with ties to Hawaii have lost their lives. Last year the Legislature honored their memories and families with the Hawaii Medal of Honor and we will continue to award this special recognition as long as this unfortunate war continues.

It is the very least that we can do.

Challenges at Home

After thirty years serving this body, I feel this is a special opportunity to share with you what I have come to see as hard truths we must face together as a people. And I think this day, when so many of us are gathered together in one place – a day when many members of our communities will take time to visit with us – is a good time to have this frank discussion.

I believe Hawaii must face the years ahead confident that our people can stand on their own. We depend too much on the outside world for our survival and that's a dangerous thing to do.

Almost all our food and consumer goods are imported. Our economy runs on tourism and the military. Our transportation system runs on oil and gas that must cross thousands of miles of open ocean to get here. Our electric systems have few backups, because unlike any other state, we don't have a national power-grid to plug into.

If real trouble comes – our current economic dependency will come back to haunt us. If you think that's an exaggeration, think about New Orleans, with all of its connections to transportation, power, and oil. Look what happened there.

Former Governor George Ariyoshi was right when he said, "We must shape our own future, not have it thrust upon us by forces over which we have little or no control."

The Challenge of Energy Independence

Today, Hawaii remains the most oil dependent state in the nation with over 90 percent of our primary energy coming from oil. And, despite all of the efforts of the legislature, the administration and energy stakeholders, we are likely to remain highly dependent on imported oil for many years to come.

It has been said that Hawaii has more renewable energy resources than any state in the nation. We do have abundant wind, solar, geothermal, ocean wave, and ocean thermal resources. However, converting those resources into usable electricity and transportation fuels is not yet technically or financially feasible.

That's because of our energy geography. Many of our renewable resources are most abundant on the Big Island, but most of our state's population is on Oahu.

Right now, Oahu's only renewable energy resources are wind, solar and garbage. Wind is intermittent and building a wind farm has been difficult because of community opposition. We can expand the amount of solid waste we use for energy, but the total increase will take only a small bite out of power demand.

We have heard much in the past year about ethanol. At the national level, the ethanol craze seems to be of greatest benefit to big corporate corn farmers. The production of ethanol from corn may not be saving the country any imported oil.

Today, we import ethanol into Hawaii. In the future, we could make it here from sugar – and that process is more than six-and-a-half times as efficient as corn-based ethanol.

We have very generous incentives for investment in ethanol production.

In the next two months, we expect at least two Hawaii-based companies will move forward with serious proposals to build ethanol plants.

Energy Hopes for the Future

There are even more promising signs.

Almost half the energy now consumed in Waikiki is used for air-conditioning. Two Hawaii-based companies are moving forward with proven technology that could be used to dramatically cut the costs of cooling buildings in downtown Honolulu and hotels in Waikiki.

Right now, these hotels and buildings consume four to 12 times more electricity than this new system would require. Makai Ocean Engineering and Honolulu Sea Water Air Conditioning would use cold seawater pumped from hundreds of feet below the surface to do the job.

Another promising development is underway by the University of Hawaii and a spin-off company, HR Bio-Petroleum. They have undertaken a pioneering effort to produce renewable fuels. Their goal is to generate fuels for transportation from marine algae, and, to use carbon dioxide from power plant stacks as the nutrient for its growth.

This technology will use algae to produce biodiesel, ethanol and animal protein feed. The products will have a much higher market value than if they were made from land-based plants. Only salt water, shorelands, and carbon dioxide are needed.

Tests of this technology will begin this spring on the Big Island at the Natural Energy Laboratory. This is a transforming technology, one that is the basis for a uniquely Hawaiian industry to export to the world.

Economic Independence

Innovation comes from new ideas like these. Innovation changes the way we act and how we think about ourselves. It helps us to diversify our economy, creating better paying jobs for our citizens. It even helps bring affordable homes within reach.

We must redouble our efforts to diversify Hawaii's economy, or we will never be able to break our state's economic addiction to tourism.

To achieve this goal we must accomplish two things: First, we must expand the base of existing businesses that pay a living wage. And second, we must better train our workforce for the opportunities of tomorrow.

We must continue to invest in the intellectual capital we have built in ocean sciences, natural energy research, astronomy, life sciences, technology and agricultural development. And we must continue to

invest in the resources that help build the intellectual capital of our children.

A Commitment to Education

So we intend to finish what we started – the repair and maintenance of our public schools. We have already made significant progress in cutting the backlog of school repair projects. Last year, we put the cash up front – 168 million dollars – so next generations would not be saddled with our debt.

Three years ago we passed the Re-inventing Education Act and while there have been a few bumps on the road to better schools, we need to give this measure a fair chance to work. Our commitment to the parents, children and citizens of this state is that we won't stop until we get the job done.

Improving Disaster Preparedness

Last year, we had several significant warnings of how unprepared we have become on the disaster front.

When the Ka Loko Dam on Kauai burst before dawn on the 14th of March, one-point-six million gallons of water came rushing down on unsuspecting residents. Seven people died, homes and land were ruined.

Our courts will decide the liability issues, but we have already learned a tragic lesson about the disrepair and neglect of our state's aging agriculture water systems.

On Tuesday, September 5th, a truck hit a freeway overpass on Oahu and turned the city into a massive parking lot. People heading west on H-1 took eight hours or more to reach their homes.

Everyone had a story to tell the next day, but the real story was how unprepared civil and state authorities were to deal with the mess. They couldn't handle a big traffic jam on the H-1; imagine if it had been a Tsunami evacuation.

Forty days later, on Sunday morning, the biggest earthquake to hit Hawaii in more than thirty years struck off the coast of the Big Island.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, but blackouts hit the islands of Hawaii, Maui and Oahu and damages are heading in the range of a quarter-of-a-billion dollars.

More than a thousand homes on the Big Island were damaged – churches, schools and public parks too, and a major hotel remains closed to this day.

The farming community was hit particularly hard when our century old irrigation system was heavily damaged.

On Oahu, 291-thousand homes were without electricity for most of the day.

Communication with the public was seriously compromised. Of the almost fifty radio stations on Oahu, only one had a backup generator.

An investigation has determined that well over a third of our state's 328-civil defense sirens would not have worked if officials had needed to sound a Tsunami alert. The sirens had no backup power supplies.

It must be obvious to everyone now, this level of response is totally unacceptable. The House will introduce a Disaster Preparedness bill this year to make sure we are better prepared the next time a sudden emergency hits the islands.

A Commitment to Child Health Care

We are long overdue fulfilling another commitment. We must ensure that all Hawaii's children have adequate health insurance. At least eight other states are working toward similar programs to meet this health care crisis. We can benefit from their experience in creating a children's health care program while not placing an undue burden on our small businesses.

I agree with Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle who said, "This is a human crisis and it demands action now."

Hawaii's Connected Challenges

We will mark an important milestone this year in preserving important agricultural lands. We will consider incentives to keep these lands green forever.

The final push for important agricultural lands comes as our affordable housing crisis has reached its breaking point. The number of our homeless is at a record high. Anger is growing over traffic, inadequate infrastructure and the inability of our citizens to earn a living wage or find a home they can afford.

I believe we can better deliver affordable rental housing to Hawaii's people with two decisive actions: First, we must maintain funding for affordable rental housing. Second, and even more importantly, we must act to create a fast-track permitting process for affordable rental housing.

This legislative initiative will provide a three-year window to eliminate most of the permitting logjam. This will remove a significant barrier to building affordable rental housing. We can do this without compromising our local environment, or Hawaii's health and safety codes.

If the project is built on ceded lands, 20 percent of the rental homes will be set-aside for Native Hawaiians.

I stand before you today, convinced that if we can find the legislative will, we have a way to meet our challenges. Challenges in affordable housing, energy, education, disaster preparedness, health insurance for our children, and economic diversification. Truly, this is a tall order, but no one said life in the House would be easy.

Looking Ahead for the State House of Representatives

We have thirteen new members of the House this year. That's a pretty good size freshman class. These new members will soon learn that survival in politics is a tricky business.

Take a stand and don't worry so much about whether you win or lose. The secret is to take care of the basics and think beyond them. Mayor Hannemann knows fixing potholes is important, but he also has the vision to move a big project forward – like mass transit.

Don't be afraid to think big like that. Think beyond the immediate.

Politics may indeed be local, but true achievement in politics comes from vision.

In 1979, Speaker James Wakatsuki shared these words of advice with new members of the House:

“What we need is the courage to stick to our plans, the courage to keep the petty irritations of the day from blocking our efforts, the courage to keep on going hour after hour.”

The citizens of this state, and the people of our nation don’t care much anymore about whether you are a Republican or a Democrat. And they won’t remember you if all you do is get a road repaved. They will remember you, and rally behind you, if you can speak to the people’s hopes and then get the job done.

To do that you will need allies within this body – people who want to get something done, too. Seek out the humble, the thoughtful, and above all, the doers. Don’t be afraid to take a risk. Your constituents hope you will.

If you listen and watch carefully, your *na’au* – your gut – will help you find the people here with hope and a willingness to try. This is how people work best together – one on one – not by fighting, but by getting to know each other. Imagine what we could achieve by understanding each other just a little better.

Thank you, and good luck in the new session.